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ABSTRACT

The institution of Indian school boards in rural Indian communities and on reservations has accompanied a return toward local control in education. Local control by ethnic communities transforms power relationships, and this changes attitudes of educators toward students -- although local boards often lack the educational expertise to attempt changes in educational policy and programs. Erickson, comparing Rough Rock Demonstration School to other kinds of schools serving Navajo students, reports that (1) Federal schools are equal or better in program and are more efficiently operated and (2) the Indian school board at Rough Rock spends little time on matters of basic educational policy. Despite the furore caused by the study, honest and critical appraisals from outside researchers are necessary to assist and improve local school boards and to prevent the demise of local control as a reform movement. (JH)

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GOPHERS OR GADFLIES: PROBLEMS OF INDIAN SCHOOL BOARDS

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Fruitfully, we may regard the school as the locus of a dramatic contest -- an agon -- where the prize is control and the dramatis personnae include the pupils, their teachers and their parents, the educational administration, the board of education, and the voting public, not to mention a variety of external associations and governmental bodies. Each of these actors has his own interests and his own particular areas where he thinks it vital to establish his control, and in his attempt to maintain and extend his areas of control, he comes into conflict with those whose interests are contrary to his own.

If today we reread Willard Waller's Sociology of Teaching, we can scarcely fail to be impressed by the shifts in area of control as among the educational dramatis personnae. At the time Waller was writing, local school boards were accustomed to regulate what we would now consider the "private lives" of their teachers; the fact that we now consider these areas of living to be "private" and personal indicates a major gain in control by the educators at the expense of the parents and school board. Moreover, the situation is not static. Under the banners of professionalization and unionization, educators are continuing to press for an enlargement of their areas of control. However, meanwhile, among some educational reformers, there has developed the feeling that the areas controlled by educators have indeed become too large, and during the past five to ten years, there has been a growth of proposals to reform and revitalize the schools by instituting or re-instituting "local control," a phase which concretely means that power is to be transferred from the educational administra-

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tion (including perhaps the teachers) to an organization which derives its legitimacy from the parents of the pupils. Needless to say, this kind of reform is exceedingly unpopular with the educators and with their organized representatives, the teachers' union, and the resultant conflict has been publicly and dramatically performed these past few years in relationship to the Ocean Hill - Brownsville School of New York City.

My own interest in these dramatic conflicts develops from my involvements with a contemporary cluster of peoples, the Indians of North America, and with my participation in researches upon the relationship between local Indian communities and the schools attended by their children. In 1963, on completing our study of the relationships between the Oglala Sioux of the Pine Ridge Reservation and the federal schools attended by their children, we (Wax, Wax, and Dumont 1964: Chap. 7) urged that, providing the Sioux were willing to assume the responsibilities, that the schools be turned over to their direction.

In this brief talk, I cannot hope to review the findings of that study which led to the formulation of that recommendation, except that I can say that we perceived many classrooms where the interaction between White teacher and Sioux pupils was such that nothing educational was being accomplished; we also observed that when a Sioux matron was brought into the school and confronted with what was going on within the classroom that she was astonished and deeply disturbed. Sioux parents are usually kept at arm's length from the schools, but we brought some into the classrooms as our research assistants, and what they observed was sufficient to initiate a critical ferment within that local Sioux community -- a ferment that still has not died down some seven years later. Rather than recapitulate the nature of our observations at Pine Ridge, I would

like to quote briefly from the more recent observations of Martha Grass, a Ponca matron, visiting the public school of White Eagle, Oklahoma, most of whose pupils are Indian:

> I went into the next room and the teacher wasn't in there and the children were running all over the place and I just went in there and sat down. I was wondering when she was going to come in. She finally came in and she said, "Good morning, Mrs. Grass. How long have you been here?" I said, "Oh, I've been here quite a while. I was nervous in the other room because it was too quiet. Now, I don't even know whose seat I'm sitting in because these children are running all over the place." So she got them quiet and she made them take their books out and that was all. Nobody read and some of the children were leaning backwards and looking at other things. I was sitting there trying to read and I looked around to see if anybody else was going to read. So I finally took the teacher's place and I said, "I'll tell you something, you children. I haven't been to school for about forty years but I believe that I can outread any of you in here." So I had to compete against them in order for them to read. We read and some of those fifth and sixth graders couldn't even read from their little books. I found that fifth and sixth graders were studying fourth grade books and yet they couldn't do the work. So I whispered around to her and I said, "I don't believe this school should even exist. No wonder we have a lot of dropouts."

While I do not know Martha Grass, we did know some Sioux matrons of her temperament and perspicacity, and we proposed that the Sioux community be involved in the administration of the schools because we knew that parents like her would not approve of what was occurring within the schoolrooms, and we thought that they could very effectively assist the educators in controlling the children and instituting a more educational atmosphere. We also believed that, if the parents were involved with the problems of operating this small local school that this responsibility would itself be profoundly educational for the rural Sioux community as a whole, both parents and pupils.

Shortly after we had written our report, and almost by coincidence, events began to develop that led to the instituting of the Rough Rock Demonstration School among the Navajo. Without myself knowing anything in detail of the processes by which that school was brought into being, but just in virtue of knowing the bureaucratic context, namely funding from the BIA, OEO, and OofEd, not to mention the involvement of other agencies, such as the Navajo Tribe, I would have to salute the man who brought this enterprise into existence as himself being an energetic, persuasive, dynamic, and skilled operator within bureaucratic contexts. Yet the question that immediately confronts us, as educational researchers, is how such an operator could manage to construct a durable relationship with a local community of impoverished and traditionalized Navajo and of how genuine could then be the format of "local control" of the Rough Rock Demonstration School. To ask such questions is not to be skeptical of the idea of "local control" but to be realistic and empirical and to have sufficient knowledge about the variable workings of democratic institutions to be curious about their actual operations in a concrete instance. Given the circumstances by which the Rough Rock Demonstration

School came into being, the observer would naturally anticipate that its political functioning would be far from a democratic utopia and much more akin to one kind of conventional school situation in the US, where a sophisticated superintendent uses his School Board much as a rubber-stamp.

To put the matter in terms of our initial agonistic framework, the instituting of a formal system of local control via an elected school board does not obviate the conflict among the various parties for control of the areas of the school. Rather the instituting of the system merely establishes a new framework within which the struggles for control continue to occur. In the conventional situation within a small city, the school board is most knowledgeable about and therefore most in control over the fiscal affairs of the school system, while large areas of school operations simply evade its vision. And, meantime -- such is the pace of events -- even the fiscal affairs of the school system have become too complex for the grasp of the average board, given the proliferation of sources of federal funds, the multiplicity of special programs and special contracts, and so on. But on the Navajo Reservation, the observer would expect that the struggle for control would assume a different form, and indeed such has proven to be the case. Educational researchers are fortunate in having available for their review a detailed study of the Rough Rock Demonstration School set in the context of comparable schools serving Navajo children and operated by the federal government and by local public agencies. The study in question is by Donald Erickson of the University of Chicago, and even though it has not yet been published, there is available a rejoinder by a team of anthropologists, linguists, and educators.

Before turning to a discussion of the study itself, and of the rejoinder, I should like to preface with a few comments about my own observations based

on living in impoverished Indian reservations. Relative to the employment available and to the land base and economic opportunity, most rural Indian concentrations are overpopulated. Yet, at the same time, most Indians want to remain there, because the area is home and is where their kith and kin are located. People reared in the kind of rural areas such as the Navajo Reservation find it difficult to adjust to urban settings with their traffic, their noise, their foul air, and their hordes of strangers. They would prefer to remain on the reservation, and in order to exercise that preference and keep from starving they have to scrounge some kind of income; accordingly, the average family on the average Indian reservation lives perilously close to the boundary of destitution: food, shelter, and clothing are critical.

To such Indian folk, the institutions which are established among them by fiat of the agencies and authorities of the exterior society represent primarily potential resources for the survival of themselves and their kin. The administrators and reformers in Washington or in other metropolitan centers may have all sorts of subtle goals and programs. Usually these avowed goals are long-range and rehabilitative: programs are intended to educate Indians, to transform their attitudes and increase their skills, and to make them successful participants in urban industrial society. At the time we were conducting our researches in Pine Ridge sixty percent of the families had cash incomes of less than one thousand dollars per year. People living under these kinds of conditions of destitution do not have the opportunity to concern themselves about long range institutional goals; what they want are food, funds, and jobs. While Sioux adults do have strong desires for the happiness of their children, they are much more concerned about the survival of their families than they are about fine new school houses. Accordingly, for the Country Sioux adults, the goals of these rehabilitative programs are less than meaningful, and the

significant thing about a program is that it provides funds or food or jobs.

Under these circumstances, if a local Indian community should assume or somehow gain control of the local school that serves its children what then should we anticipate that the consequences will be? In the case of the Rough Rock Demonstration School among the Navajo, the answer I have already heard several times implicit in the public speeches of Robert Roessel. He has told us that the Board immediately began to focus its attention on the matter of subprofessional employment and that it began to insist on schemes for dividing the opportunities for employment among the residents of the community. Regardless of Roessel's criticisms that such subdividing of responsibilities would in fact interfere with the efficiencies of operating the school as an institution, the Board proceeded, and it did so even in cases where realistically (or so it at first seemed to Roessel) there were far greater costs to providing the employment than having the service performed by an outside agency (e.g. laundry). What Roessel did not communicate in his public speeches was the extent of Board interest or intervention in the educational policies of the school or in the organization of the school as a professional educational enterprise. He stated that the Board did insist on certain humane reforms, such as allowing children to go home on weekends and allowing parents to remove their children from the school for such purposes as the performance of rituals, but in his report, the Board took little cognizance of such things as curriculum. Roessel has lavished much praise on the wisdom of the members of his Board, and judged by these accounts, I would agree. The Board acted in the areas where it had expertise and it refrained from acting in the areas where with good reason it felt that Roessel and his professional advisors and staff had their expertise.

In a sense, this meant that the Board absolved itself of responsibilities for the educational program of Rough Rock, but if this is true then it is but little different from the pattern of schools in many small towns and rural areas.

In 1969, Donald A. Erickson and his associates presented their report on "The Community School at Rough Rock". This report caused a minor furore in certain circles involved with American Indian affairs, but to myself as a reader who frankly knew little of the background of the research and the controversy, the significant thing about the report is the extent to which it reported exactly what I would have anticipated. In my judgment the report is honest and accurate, and the research was well-conceived and reasonably well conducted. There is a partial failure in the context of interpretation, but that failure is equally evident in the outraged responses of the critics of the report.

Erickson designed his research so that Rough Rock was compared to other kinds of schools also serving a largely Navajo clientele. One of these schools happened to be a federal school operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and supervised by a man of maturity and wisdom in Indian education. Comparing that federal school with Rough Rock, it becomes apparent, even in the scholarly and cautious academic prose, that the BIA school is in many respects the better operated; certainly, for example, it has a better atmosphere in its dormitories and a more efficiently operated dormitory system; also, and despite the expertise of the consultants to Rough Rock, the BIA program was of equal quality or better in a number of significant respects. And, finally, as we would have anticipated from my previous comments, Erickson's analysis of the minutes of the School Board at Rough Rock reveals that it gave little time or energy to most matters of basic educational policy.

I do not see why these findings should surprise us or why they should have earned Erickson a demerit in the eyes of those concerned with Indian rights. Benevolent dictatorships and efficient professional bureaucracies often look far superior to democratically constituted institutions. If we judge merely on narrowly scholastic terms and if we bear in mind what small town rural school systems are like, then there is no reason to anticipate that a school system which has substantial Indian local control will appear any better than its federally operated counterpart, and there is much reason to anticipate that it will appear far worse than the federal school when the latter had the benefits of a dedicated, professional career employee as its supervisor. If those of us who have urged some return to the procedure of local community control are not prepared to encounter these facts of life, we had best pick up our research toys and go home. Unless we are clear in our own minds as to the advantages and disadvantages of local control of schools by ethnic communities, we are going to make such demands on these schools and set such standards that the whole procedure is likely to collapse.

Local control by ethnic communities does offer the possibility of some significant benefits just as it offers the possibility of some inadequacies. One immediate benefit does not require much positive action on the part of the elected school board, but simply its structural presence, and that is a transformation in power relationships. If members of the ethnic community sit in positions of legitimate authority vis a vis the educational staff, this serves to transform the image that these latter entertain of the ethnic children as being incompetent and impotent, and thus it provides a powerful goad to educators to discard their institutional arrogance and to cease working with conceptual schemes in which the children are simply regarded as "culturally deprived" or otherwise lacking in the competencies and potentials of properly reared children.

To offer a classical illustration, I would suggest that when Aristotle was engaged as a tutor for the son of Phillip of Macedon, he might have thought that the family were barbarians, but he could scarcely have considered his powerful and wealthy employers as being incompetent and he could scarcely have approached the young Alexander with the notion that he was "culturally deprived" or otherwise disadvantaged (cf. Wax, Wax & Dumont 1964: 4-6).

There is another possible benefit to the configuration of local control. It is not a benefit which appears in such pioneer works as that of Waller and at that time it seems that he was not able to envision it. We do however find it in the analyses of such contemporary sociologists of education as Howard S. Becker. Becker addresses himself to the question of how is it that among the best of our contemporary public schools are those which are located in the suburbs and serve the children of the professionalized upper middleclass, and he argues that only in these suburbs do the parents have both the knowledge and political power to crash through the barriers by which the educators defend themselves and their operations. For example, because some of the parents are deeply learned in science and mathematics, they are able to check the curriculum and the progress of their children with knowledgeable and critical eyes, and they constitute a potent and expert audience to the operations of the school. The parents are able to exert pressures both upon the educators and the pupils. In contrast, in the typical urban area -- and especially within the slums and ethnic ghettoes -- the parents are relatively incompetent to judge the curriculum or the achievements of their children, and so they are unable to function as an audience or pressure group vis a vis scholastic operations. Insofar as such parents acquire control or partial control in

relationship to a school, they simply lack the technical competence to institute changes beneficial to their children. Some of these parents may be wise, some may be sophisticated in terms of interpersonal relationships, and many of them may wish desperately to improve the life chances of their children but they simply lack the technical knowhow to do anything but attempt to operate the school pretty much in traditional terms.

Insofar as we are applied social scientists concerned with education, it is our obligation to meet these parents halfway -- or more than halfway. And here there is an excellent precedent in the Agricultural Extension movement of the past half century in the US. The federal government did not force farmers to operate in certain ways; and it certainly did not attempt to enforce farm consolidation upon the farmers. But rather it made available to them a large variety of technical information, and it did so, not just verbally or on printed pages, but by demonstration and example, so that farmers as practical men -- men with their very livelihoods at stake -- could see how others were improving their agricultural operations and their economic situations. If we are to take seriously the aspirations of ethnic communities who are clamoring for local control as a strategy whereby to improve the life chances of their children, then in the same way we have to provide assistance to them. Insofar as this assistance is offered merely by means of university consultants and written documents, we are benefiting ourselves but not them. Impoverished ethnic peoples have good reason to be suspicious of complex verbal formulas; and in my experience Indians especially need the opportunity to see how things operate. A local Indian school board cannot out of thin air and its own imaginings conjure up a successful and critical role for itself, nor can it do so out of short training programs in which they are lectured by professional

educators and administrators. They need the opportunity to observe how various kinds of schools operate and to study how the functioning of the local school board integrates with that operation.

What/an Indian or other local school board will especially need is the honest and critical appraisal of outside researchers such as ourselves as to what is occurring within the walls of the school for which it is responsible. The investigations of the team of Donald Erickson could have been enormously valuable to the local Navajo board if they had been presented to them in an honest fashion and if the board could have been encouraged to duplicate these observations for itself by visiting the schools and dormitories with which its own school was being unfavorably compared. Instead, we have the unseemly spectacle of a team of persons who are experts on Indian education rushing in to denounce the Erickson report even before it was released to the public and in effect insisting that Rough Rock is beyond criticism, so that what Erickson observed simply was not so, and that the neglect of Navajo children in the dormitories simply does not occur.

It has been only too typical of much research in the field education that it is inhouse research -- captive research which does not tell the truth and cannot tell the truth lest there be reprisals from those who operate the schools and have influence with regard to the funding of research or access to research sites. In consequence, much of educational research has been emasculated, and by reading the dull pages of educational journals, the reader cannot discover what is occurring in school classrooms, hallways, and lavatories. If he wants to find out what is really going on he has to turn to the scandal pages of the daily press or to the occasional reports of gifted and irate

reformers such as James Herndon, Johnathan Kozol, or Herbert Kohl. If the reception of the Erickson report is any indication, we are about to witness the same process of covering up the facts and abusing the honest researchers that has so long characterized the field of public education. If we as educational researchers permit this pattern to be established among ourselves, then local control as a reform movement is probably doomed, and we will have conspired to facilitate its demise.

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